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SUBJECT: Nigeria: Obasanjo Foreign Policy

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reason: 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary. President Olusegun Obasanjo is his own Foreign Minister. To understand how he has redirected Nigeria relations with the rest of the world, we examine his personal character and policy agenda. Obasanjo military career, his term as interim Head of State in the 1970s, and his years as a retired elder statesman and political prisoner helped shape his character. Nothing in his background prepared him to head the executive branch of government in a constitutional democracy, and it shows. Obasanjo does not like to engage in the give-and-take of domestic politics and, consequently, he is not very good at it. In the area of foreign affairs, however, he has been able to establish and carry out his own policies, largely unchallenged by politicians and public opinion. As the 2003 Presidential election approaches, criticism of his extensive foreign travel and his neglect of domestic concerns will likely increase. Obasanjo could respond to his critics by either staunchly defending his record, including his special relations with the United States, or by diverting public attention with a new, unpredictable foreign policy agenda. End summary.

Special Relations

¶12. (C) The United States and Nigeria have had a "special relationship" since the May 29, 1999 inauguration of President Olusegun Obasanjo. The U.S. delegation to the inauguration, headed by the then Secretary of Transportation and Rev Jesse Jackson, was given pride of place at every event. Within weeks, an eighteen-member interagency team visited Nigeria and established working relations with their Nigerian counterparts. In the ensuing months, the Secretaries of Energy, State, Treasury, Defense and

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Agriculture visited Nigeria, as did an eleven-member Congressional delegation headed by Minority Leader Richard Gephardt. The Clinton Administration designated Nigeria one of four key countries to receive USG assistance in consolidating democracy. Meanwhile, senior Nigerian officials made reciprocal visits to the United States. The two countries also formed and held the first session of a Joint Economic Partnership Committee (JEPC) and signed agreements that permitted OPIC and the ExIm Bank to resume operations in Nigeria. In addition, an American consulting team headed by retired Gulf War-era army chiefs began working with the Nigerian defense establishment on a program aimed at strengthening civilian oversight of defense and re-professionalizing the armed forces.

¶13. (C) Visits by President Jacques Chirac, Premier Jean Chretien and Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori showed that Nigeria opening to the outside world was multilateral. President Obasanjo traveled extensively, visiting scores of countries and setting a pace of foreign travel that in two years would equal the foreign travel of all previous Nigerian Heads of State combined. But the visit of President Bill Clinton to Abuja in August 2000 highlighted the fact that relations with the United States remained special. The two leaders announced numerous bilateral cooperative initiatives, among them Operation Focus Relief, which two months later brought over 150 Special Forces soldiers to Nigeria to train two Nigerian battalions for peace enforcement operations under UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone. In FY2001, USAID programs kicked into high gear with an average of sixty consultants arriving each month to conduct programs in health, education, good governance, and economic reform.

Continuity and Change

¶14. (C) Looking back over the three-year transformation of US-Nigeria relations, one might conclude that it was

Nigeria change in government -- from a military dictatorship to a democratically-elected civilian administration -- that made all the difference. From the U.S. perspective this would be a fair assessment. For the United States, the oppression of Sani Abacha military regime raised a host of legal, moral, ideological and human rights barriers to normal bilateral relations. These remained in place during the benign interregnum of LTG Abdulsalami Abubakar, and began to be lifted only after the election of the Obasanjo government. So as far as the United States is concerned, the advent of a democratic civilian government facilitated the dramatic improvement in bilateral relations.

15. (C) Not necessarily so for Nigeria. Historically, Nigeria foreign relations are affected less by its form of government than by its national interests -- much of which are rooted in its geography -- and by the personality and political agenda of its Head of State. It was, after all, a military regime that dismantled the oppressive legacy of Sani Abacha in the eleven months following his death in June 1998. It was Abubakar who established and then stuck to an ambitious timetable for the holding of elections that brought Olusegun Obasanjo to power. But despite the tectonic changes this caused in bilateral relations with the U.S., the Commonwealth, and other developed countries, many aspects of Nigeria foreign policy remained unchanged from the Abacha regime, through the Abubakar interregnum and into the Obasanjo Administration. Despite these leadership changes at home, Nigerian peacekeepers remained engaged in West Africa, for example, carrying out an orderly draw-down in Liberia and a corresponding build-up of ECOMOG operations into Sierra Leone.

16. (C) It is Nigeria geographical characteristics -- its location, size, population, resource base and level of development -- that help shape its national interests and, in turn, ensure a large measure of continuity in the way it relates to its neighbors and to the rest of the world. These factors explain why, in the three decades since the civil war, despite dramatic changes in political leadership and forms of government, Nigeria has consistently maintained its standing as the paramount country in West Africa, a key player in the OAU, and an important member of the OIC, OPEC and the G-77. In order to maintain Nigeria's leadership within these organizations, Nigerian Heads of State must accept constraints on their conduct of foreign relations. While, for example, Obasanjo might have wished to vote with the Community of Democracies in support of the Cuba resolution at the 2001 UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, the pressure to vote with the G-77 was even greater. Barring disintegration of the Nigerian federal state, it will remain the most populous country in Africa and a major exporter of oil. These realities, in turn, will continue to ensure continuity, as well as a certain inflexibility, in Nigeria foreign relations.

17. (C) While Nigeria national interests help explain aspects of its foreign relations that remain relatively constant, changes in political leadership help explain several dramatic shifts in foreign policy, like those that occurred over the past three years. To understand the GON currently warm relations with the United States, therefore, we need to consider the personal character and political agenda of President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Obasanjo Modus Operandi

18. (C) Olusegun Obasanjo character and personality were shaped by his quarter century-long military career, his three-year term as a transitional military Head of State, and his two decades as a retired elder statesman, spent partly in prison and partly in the company of men like Carter and Gorbachev, whom he considers his peers and philosophical fellow-travelers. His leadership on democracy and transparency issues, especially through organizations such as Transparency International, the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group and the African Leadership Forum made him one of the best known proponents of democracy and human rights in Africa.

19. (C) None of that experience was helpful in preparing Obasanjo for the role he must now play as head of the executive branch of government in a constitutional democracy. His soldierly belief in the importance of strategic and tactical leadership exercised through a chain of command is visceral, and it is augmented by his oft-stated belief that

his Presidency was divinely ordained (Obasanjo cites the fact that he was not killed during the Abacha regime as proof). When the National Assembly balked at his budget submission in February 2000 or when it tinkered with details of his Niger Delta Development Bill several months later, to cite but two examples, Obasanjo viewed these actions as insubordination. He responded by attempting to cajole and even bribe legislators into deposing their leaders, but met with only mixed success. Midway through his term as President, Obasanjo has shown that he lacks the political skills and the willingness to compromise that are required to build a consensus in support of his domestic agenda.

¶10. (C) By contrast, Obasanjo has embraced his foreign affairs portfolio as though it offers him a welcome respite from the rough and tumble of domestic politics. In the area of foreign affairs, he can behave as a general. He has a great deal of latitude to shape both the style and substance of Nigeria relations with the rest of the world, within the constraints imposed by Nigeria geography. While he cannot, for example, radically alter Nigeria Middle East policy without offending Nigeria large Muslim population, he ordered the Nigeria delegation to the 2000 session of the Commission on Human Rights to abstain on an anti-Israel Middle East resolution. The move signaled that, unlike the late Sani Abacha, he would not engage in gratuitous America-baiting.

¶11. (C) Public opinion hardly impinges on President Obasanjo ability to conduct Nigeria foreign relations. Early in his Administration, the defense establishment, buttressed by little more than a few newspaper editorials, cited strong public pressure on the government to bring Nigerian troops home from Sierra Leone. When a resurgent RUF took UNAMSIL peacekeepers hostage in May 2000, however, these same officials readily agreed to a plan that would have dispatched additional battalions to Sierra Leone with a peace enforcement mandate. There was no consultation with, and no hint of dissent from, the Nigerian public or from the legislative branch of government. Similarly, Nigerian legislators told visiting U.S. Justice Department officials in April 2000 that the Nigerian public would not stand for the extradition of Nigerian criminal suspects to the United States. But when the Obasanjo Administration circumvented the extradition process and rendered four suspects into U.S. custody just six months later -- again without consulting the people elected representatives here was no public protest, and only limited dissent in Nigeria's rambunctious press.

¶12. (C) Periodically legislators and media commentators allege that Obasanjo extensive foreign travels have earned Nigeria nothing, but have diverted the President attention from pressing domestic problems. Obasanjo has responded that foreign travel is necessary to repair the damage done to Nigeria international reputation by the oppressive Abacha regime. He points to Nigeria readmission to the Commonwealth, the conclusion of an IMF standby agreement, debt relief offered by some bilateral donors and the Paris Club, and USG narcotics certification as examples of the benefits of his foreign visits. For the time being, such criticism has subsided. When Obasanjo asked the National Assembly for supplemental funds for the purchase of a new presidential jet, citing incidents that raised questions about the air-worthiness of his current plane, legislators eventually approved the request.

¶13. (C) President Obasanjo relies on a very small group of long-time associates to advise him on foreign affairs. As far as we know, the group does not include senior officials of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs or Defense. Their access to the President is generally limited to the weekly meetings of the Council of State (Cabinet). On a daily basis, Obasanjo turns to National Security Adviser LTG (ret) Aliyu Mohammed Gusau for intelligence and advice on both domestic and foreign security threats. The heads of Nigeria various national security agencies channel their concerns through the NSA. For advice concerning normal diplomatic activity -- foreign visits, international agreements, the GON position on issues coming to a vote in international fora, etc. basanjo relies on his Foreign Affairs Adviser, Ambassador Patrick Dele Cole. The MFA counterparts to our Assistant Secretaries of State report to Cole more often than they do the Foreign Minister Sule Lamido. On foreign economic matters, Obasanjo accepts advice from either Vice President Atiku Abubakar or Chief Economic Adviser Philip Asiodu, at times appearing to play one off against the other. When the President wants to think outside the box, we are told he consults with such figures as LTG (ret) Joe Garba (who served as Obasanjo Foreign Minister and UN Perm Rep from 1976-79 and who now heads the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies) or Chief Emeka Anyaoku (the former Commonwealth Secretary General who now heads a panel to restructure and

¶14. (C) During his years as an elder statesman, Obasanjo maintained contact with a large number of current and former Heads of State whom he considers his friends or colleagues. As the democratically-elected President of Africa most populous country, he interacts with even the most powerful Heads of State as his equals. Nevertheless, he has a keen sense of power relationships, and interacts easily with senior USG officials without evincing rank consciousness. If time permits, he prefers to conduct the business of foreign affairs face-to-face, but he has been known to broker deals on the telephone. His relaxed, informal style of conducting business occasionally leads to slip-ups, however. He does not always inform his advisers about all important details discussed in telephone conversations or in one-on-one meetings. We have also observed that, after agreeing to a certain course of action, he occasionally issues oral instructions on-the-spot to his Chief of Staff or to the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, but does not always follow-up to ensure action is taken.

Obasanjo Agenda

¶15. (C) President Obasanjo foreign policy agenda, as gleaned from speeches and other public statements, is fairly straight-forward: his top priorities are to obtain debt relief for Nigeria and to promote regional stability and economic development. Nigeria has no hegemonic ambitions (it has a minor but potentially valuable territorial dispute with Cameroon that it has referred to the International Court of Justice, and a minor maritime boundary dispute with Equatorial Guinea). It is preoccupied instead with maintaining its own national unity. Among the most demographically and ethnically diverse nations in Africa, Nigeria experiences frequent outbursts of ethnic violence, fueled by religious or local resource disputes. These incidents revive the trauma of Nigeria's devastating civil war (1967-70), and keep the leadership alert to regional threats to national unity. Obasanjo views ethnic strife in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, and to a lesser degree in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau and the Casamance as a possible contagion. He aggressively promotes conflict mediation and peacekeeping in West Africa, not only to maintain Nigeria's stature as the preeminent country in the sub-region, but because large Nigerian populations dwell in some of the conflict-prone states, and because Nigeria itself is vulnerable to such internal conflicts.

¶16. (C) Unlike Sani Abacha who used coercion, threats and bribes to exercise influence within ECOWAS, Obasanjo seeks to build consensus in the sub-region drawing on his stature as a democratically-elected leader. He has used this approach to support regional integration by, for example, acknowledging and dealing with the Anglophone-Francophone divide within ECOWAS and by favoring an accelerated timetable for monetary union. Obasanjo also actively worked with other ECOWAS Heads of State to ensure unified rejection of the coup in Cote d'Ivoire that brought Gen. Robert Guei to power. With Liberia, however, his use of inducements, his refusal to resort to coercion and his avuncular treatment of Charles Taylor have proven ineffective.

¶17. (C) Both President Obasanjo and National Security Adviser Aliyu Mohammed Gusau have expressed deep concern about threats to Nigeria's national unity from outside the sub-region. They are wary of possible covert support by fundamentalist Islamic countries for the introduction of Sharia criminal law in certain states of Northern Nigeria. But they consider the spread of Libyan influence to be an even greater threat, and view the Niger Republic as a front-line state. Obasanjo has exhibited paternal concern for Niger's sovereignty and territorial integrity, for example by bankrolling Niger's Presidential election last year and by depleting Nigeria's own grain stocks to prevent famine in Niger. Obasanjo has cultivated warm relations with France and, unlike some of his predecessors, is not paranoid about French ulterior motives in its Africa policy.

¶18. (C) Obasanjo's foreign policy strategy for promoting economic development focuses on achieving cancellation of most if not all of Nigeria's USD 30 billion external debt, promoting diversified (by country and sector) trade and investment relations and welcoming foreign aid that bolsters GON efforts in the areas of education, health, public security and economic restructuring. These goals, and

especially the goal of debt cancellation, go a long way toward explaining why Nigeria is currently so well disposed towards the United States and, to a lesser degree, towards Europe and Japan. The President recognizes that the US holds less than three percent of Nigeria's debt, but he considers Washington's influence within the Paris Club and the IFIs to be pivotal. His attitude is unlikely to change as long as there is even a remote prospect Nigeria will obtain some degree of debt cancellation.

¶19. (C) Obasanjo claims to agree with Nigeria foreign creditors that state ownership, subsidized prices and corruption are the major obstacles to Nigeria economic development. But he appears to be even more aware that there are vested interests bent on disrupting privatization, price deregulation and anti-corruption campaigns that could threaten their rice bowls. Moreover, a number of these state-controlled enterprises were created under his leadership during 1976-79, and he may have some sentimental attachment to them. As a result, Obasanjo progress in implementing these kinds of reforms -- reforms that are key to achieving debt cancellation by Nigeria's creditors -- will continue to be incremental at best. Obasanjo's appeals to foreign businessmen and foreign governments for increased investment are, unfortunately, often little more than folksy exhortations with little follow-up. His call for the establishment of a US-Nigeria Binational Commission appears to be driven more by a desire for parity with South Africa than by a sense of economic necessity.

¶20. (C) President Obasanjo engages energetically on continental and global issues with a view towards enhancing Nigeria stature and influence in various international organizations. He has forged what he calls a strategic partnership with President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa. The two presidents have described their countries as the twin pillars of security in Sub-Saharan Africa, and they, along with Algeria and Senegal, are carrying out a new strategy for an African renaissance, known as the Millenium Action Plan. Both Nigeria and South Africa view their informal alliance as a counter-weight to Muamar Gaddafi continental ambitions. Nigeria needs this partnership with South Africa because alone Nigeria does not have the ability to project its power continent-wide. The relationship could come under strain if they are ever forced to compete for a single permanent African seat on the UN Security Council.

¶21. (C) Nigeria's (Obasanjo's) efforts at conflict resolution on the African continent are wide-ranging, if not uniformly effective. Aside from its predominant role in West Africa, Nigeria has sought for itself or has readily accepted a central role in Burundi, Sudan, the DROC and Zimbabwe. The GON actively participates in OPEC (Presidential Petroleum Adviser Lukman just ended his term as Secretary General), promoting sustainable prices and production levels for a commodity from which Nigeria derives over eighty-five percent of its revenue. President Obasanjo views Nigeria membership in the Commonwealth, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the G-77, and his personal involvement in the World Economic Forum at Davos, as stature-enhancing. His ultimate goal is to win for Nigeria the stature, power and influence that go with a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. UNSC permanent membership would validate Nigerian sense of self-importance, enhance its influence over regional peacekeeping in Africa, and give it much-needed ballast for its dealings with creditor countries.

The Democracy Dividend

¶22. (C) At the outset, we noted that Nigeria transition from a military dictatorship to a democratically-elected civilian government had less impact on its foreign relations than did its national interests and the personality and political agenda of its Head of State. We also noted that, midway through his Presidency, public opinion has had little influence on President Obasanjo foreign policy. This is likely to change as the 2003 presidential election approaches. Obasanjo remains vulnerable to the charge that he has spent too much time abroad and has achieved little to show for it. Obasanjo has made debt relief the center-piece of his relationship with the United States. His similarly urgent appeals to Paris Club members and the IFIs for debt cancellation have not resonated in the absence of far-reaching economic reform.

¶23. (C) Other Presidential contenders will cite failure to produce results in this key piece of his foreign policy strategy as proof of his ineffectiveness. The unabashedly

close relationship Obasanjo has forged with the United States also can be distorted and used against him. If there is trouble in the Middle East, for example, political opponents could easily whip up sentiment among Nigerian Muslims. And though his track record in economic reform has been disappointing, Obasanjo will face his toughest challenge if he follows through with his stated intention to deregulate fuel prices and privatize parastatals with national importance. The National Labor Congress, the group that has spearheaded strikes against fuel price hikes in the past, may deride the President as a toady of the IMF.

124. (C) Assuming Obasanjo throws his hat into the ring, the 2003 Presidential election will mark only the second time in Nigerian history that a President has stood for re-election (President Shehu Shagari was re-elected, then overthrown in 1983). If political rivals are able to threaten Obasanjo reelection by criticizing his foreign affairs record, the President may respond as any other political incumbent would: by either staunchly defending his record, or by doing something dramatic to deflect the criticism. Foreign relations is one of the few areas that affords Obasanjo the kind of free rein he needs to do something dramatic. There is a chance, therefore, that Nigeria's foreign relations could take an unpredictable turn as Obasanjo's term as President draws to a close. His extensive foreign travels may have suggested a number of options; options involving other leading members of the G-77, OPEC or the OIC. Obasanjo received red-carpet treatment in Iran and Russia and can expect the same when he visits Indonesia and China. China, in particular, has stepped up its overtures to Nigeria in recent weeks. India or Pakistan are also potential suitors. A foreign policy that focuses on other aspiring regional powers may not enable Nigeria to obtain debt cancellation, but may allow it to play an even larger role within the G-77 and become a leading exponent of greater South-South collaboration.

JETER